

A visit with Erin Byers Murray

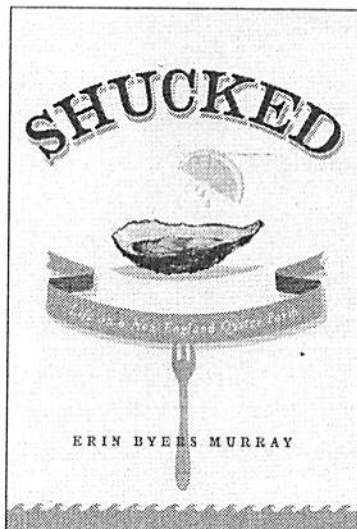
'Shucked' author details life with Island Creek Oysters

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How did you first get involved with Island Creek?

At the time, I was working for the Web site, DailyCandy.com and visited the farm on a hunt for story ideas. It was one of those crystal clear August days on the bay and I was fascinated by their operation. I thought, 'wouldn't it be incredible to work here?' And then I found out they harvest oysters year-round, even in the dead of winter and I realized there was a much deeper story to tell.

What made you want to leave your previous life/job and get involved with oyster farming? I was looking to take a break from my desk job and to get my hands dirty for a little while. After visiting the farm, I realized I'd found exactly what I'd been looking for.



Erin Byers Murray penned the book after spending 18 months working for Island Creek Oysters. It is part business story, part memoir.

Photo credit: Adam DeTour

During your time there, what was an average day like? The farm operates at different speeds depending on the season. During the summer, when the oyster seed has just come in and we're busy running the upwellers (where the baby oysters are nurtured until they're about a quarter inch in length), the days are much longer and might start at sunrise (or earlier) for some hand picking on the tide, followed by sorting and bagging oysters on the oyster barge, and finish with grading (sizing) the seed on the docks in the evening. During the winter, things slow down a bit and the days consist of harvesting and sorting oysters plus doing repair projects to prepare for the busy season.

Why has oyster farming become such a successful business in Duxbury? Duxbury Bay is a very unique and special place to grow oysters. The water temperature, tidal flows, and specific plankton that grow in these waters produce very briny, sweet, juicy oysters. Plus, the farmers who grow in Duxbury put a great deal of time, energy, and effort into their growing practices. It is a skill to grow outstanding oysters and I think the men and women who do it here have really perfected their craft.

Did you always know you wanted to write this book? Telling the story of Island Creek was always at the back of my mind, from the minute I visited the farm in 2008. Several months after I started working there, after my first summer on the farm, I started putting the story on paper and realized there really was an enough to fill a book.

Tell me a little about the content of the book. The book is my first-hand account of the 18 months I spent working for Island Creek, starting with my time on the water as a farmhand up until the opening of the Island Creek Oyster Bar in October 2010. I worked in every facet of the business, including helping out with the annual Island Creek Oyster Festival, so the story bobs and weaves around the story of this small-but-growing independent food business. There are also some personal revelations throughout the book so it takes on a memoir feel, especially toward the end.

Tell me a funny/interesting anecdote about life as an oyster farmer. I had never really driven a boat when I arrived at Island Creek, and founder Skip Bennett knew this when he hired me. One of the most humbling moments was the day I was out on the float with my crew and he called and asked me to drive the boat to the Town Dock to come get him. I panicked at first but got in the boat and drove over to meet him. As I neared the dock to park the boat, I accidentally slammed the throttle into reverse and jolted back. I tried to recover by putting it back into gear but it was too late – I basically slammed the nose of the boat into the dock right where Skip was standing. There were a few other growers standing with him so I got teased quite a bit for my

‘parking job.’ But it quickly helped me conquer my fear of driving the boat.

Do you think you’ll stay connected with Island Creek and the business of farming oysters in the future? I consider the folks at Island Creek family and will always stay connected to them personally. As for farming, I’m sure I’ll be back out on the tide soon. There’s nothing more rewarding than hand-picking oysters on an early morning low tide – and it will always be my favorite way to escape the desk.

Tell us one thing that people would be surprised to know about oysters/oyster farming. One detail about oysters that I find fascinating is how much their flavor changes from one season to the next. This time of year, oysters from Duxbury are starting to taste sweeter. In a month, that flavor will only intensify. It’s a great excuse to eat oysters every day; it helps you see how much they change from one season to the next.